BOOK REVIEW

A New History of Surgery*

For now many years, a history of surgery of moderate compass, at once readable and reliable, has been a desideratum. Gurlt's three volumes of 1898, checked by Sudhoffs' massive contribution on mediæval surgery (1914-18), constitute the standard reference works and store-houses of information up to the end of the 16th century. Few busy surgeons, however, have time to read them in the original, and here, Sir Clifford Allbutt's delightful St. Louis address (1905), covering much the same ground, has been a primer of immense service to English-speaking physicians. Billings' survey, in the Dennis "System" (1895), was the most accurate, informing and critical account of the whole subject in English, but as being constructed along the old Haeser-Daremberg plan of paragraphing a long succession of names, *more bibliographico,* it is a bit dry and disappointing, hence is more an infallible librarian's reference-manual, for checking up on facts and dates, than a going or inspiring narrative, to be read and reached out for with gusto. Apart from Allbutt's little book, which is quite as precious and symphonic in its way as (say) Stopford Brooke's "Primer of English Literature," the nearest thing we have to a moving, informing narrative is perhaps George Fischer's "Surgery a Hundred Years Ago" (1876), which was Englished by C. H. von Klein in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* during 1897-8 (vols. xxviii-xxx *passim*). The volume before us, by Dr. Walter von Brunn, professor of medical history at Rostock, was, as the talented author states in his preface, written to be read rather than to be shelved for reference. A book of this kind obviously fills a long-felt want. Illustrated with no less than 317 effective cuts, its deliberate object is to set off the recent mechanisation of surgery, which has occasioned so many timely growls and heartfelt groans on the part of our German colleagues. The

*W. von Brunn: *Kurze Geschichte der Chirurgie,* iv (1 l.) 339 pp. 8°. Berlin, J. Springer, 1928.

surgeon's calling, like the dentist's, does happen to be, in part, mechanical, whence, as von Brunn very rightly affirms, his readiest cultural offset is to be found in the history of his profession; meaning by "culture," not the namby-pamby, pigeon-livered, Bunthorne concept of the man in the street, but "the knowledge of the best that has been thought and said in the world," the knowledge which is power. For this reason also, as our author truly says, no one could (or should) hope to write a meaningful history of surgery who is not an actual practitioner of the art. The tyro reveals his inability to think surgically at once. To convey the essential *raison d'être* of surgery, the historian must answer three leading questions: Why is surgery? What is surgery? Whence and how came surgery? The best answer to the first query (always transcendental) is perhaps contained in an observation of Rebecca West—"To those who fall and hurt themselves, one runs with comfort; by those who lie dangerously stricken by a disease one sits and waits," which takes us at once into the rationale of prehistoric man's thorn-punctured abscesses, fish-toothed saws and decompressive trephinings against blindness, at the same time stressing the Roman (Themison) view of internal medicine as "a meditation upon death." Surgery has thus always preceded internal medicine, as being the most aggressive and effective of all arms of primitive therapy, a purposeful attempt to "meet death coming" and cheat impending doom. How came it? Initially, from the primitive intuition that "relief from suffering is an attainable goal," which, in mechanics, is Maupertuis' Principle of Least Action, or as the old Scotch lady said, getting rid of a temptation by yielding to it; for even a monkey will pick at a biting insect or an offending thorn. Later came simple observation of the effects of puncture, incision, boring (trephining), sawing or even of letting well enough alone. From his initial sentence—"the oldest of healing methods is surgery"—our author winds into these questions with intelligence and ability. Getting rid of foreign bodies and staunching hemorrhage was the probable starting point. Then came splinting of fractures

(the dog on three legs), trephining with chipped flints and the fashioning of knives and saws. Throughout these antique phases, the scheme of illustration is so exhaustive and complete that it would make an almost intelligible "movie" of the subject. The neat groups of primitive and ancient surgical instruments, assembled and photographed by Meyer Steineg and Sudhoff, are all included, and one misses nothing except such items as the Venetian bleeding glasses of the 17th-18th centuries, the wound-suckers of the 18th century, certain statues, inset placques or medals commemorating famous surgeons, effective pictures of recent military phases or modern oil paintings of surgical operations. Striking indeed are the Finnish bath (p. 30), the ex-voto objects (44-52), the Etruscan bridge-work (81), the kits of Roman instruments (106-107), Andry's crooked tree as an analogue of the strapped scoliotic spine (247) and the idyllic photo (286) of Billroth at St. Gilgen (*"Das ist ein Abend wie ich keinen sah"*). The atrocities which pass for Behring (256) and Mikulicz (287) might easily be replaced by better photos in a later edition. The narrative throughout is flowing and going, there is but little cluttering up of the story with factual references (dates), which have been otherwise well taken care of in von Brunn's introduction to the Kirschmann and Nordmann System (*Die Chirurgie,* Berlin, 1926, I, 1-76). Our colleague sustained very grave mutilating injuries in the late war, which have compelled him to relinquish the actual practice of his profession for the teaching of its history. His book is cordially recommended to American surgeons as an attractive and reliable introduction to the subject. Merely to glance at the pictures is to understand why the ancient Teutonic name for surgery was *die Heilkunde* (the healing art) and why great soldiers like Frederick and Napoleon sniffed at internal medicine (a poor thing in their day), but loyally upheld the surgeon.

F. H. GARRISON.